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**CHRISTOPHER DAVIS:** Hello. Welcome to the career and academic resource center podcast. I am Christopher Davis, the associate director of the career and academic resource center and your host. And today, it is my great pleasure to talk to Ryan Jones. Do you go by Ryan Jones or Ryan Christopher Jones?

**RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES:** My byline is Ryan Christopher Jones. That's how most people know me.

**CHRISTOPHER DAVIS:** OK. So Ryan is a current ALB student although he'll be graduating shortly. He is a photojournalist, he's also worked as a faculty aide during his time as an ALB student here at Harvard Extension School. And I'm very thrilled to have him here today. I wanted to talk to him about a couple of things. First of all as I mentioned, he is a photojournalist.

And to give a couple of examples of his recent work and I'm sure he'll give us others, there was a wonderful piece in The Atlantic magazine that was published I think a couple of months ago in November, *Climbing The Economic Ladder in Fresno California*. And I'll be linking these in the podcast description of course. This piece which I think it says Ryan, you had covered this family for a number of years, the Fernandez family in Fresno, California and the photojournalism that is part of the piece is very stunning indeed.

Also recently, Ryan was honored for the photojournalism he did reporting for a long piece that was published in the new York times in the summer of 2020. *The Last Anointing*, excuse me, which is-- I don't know if words can do it justice, certainly, the photographs are a big part of the story but it was a stunning piece that was honored recently, although it was published in summer of 2020 and the piece really goes into a lot of detail about Catholic priests performing last rites on COVID patients during the darkest days of the pandemic. And it's a stunning piece.

So Ryan, first of all, thank you for being here today.

**RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES:** Thanks for having me.

**CHRISTOPHER DAVIS:** First of all, I would love to hear in your words about your photojournalism work. How you started in that area, some of the work you've done. I mean, the two pieces that I referenced are recent examples but if there's anything else you'd like to share with us. And certainly what it was like kind of working on those pieces which a lot of work went into it.

**RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES:** Sure. So I've been a working photojournalist for about 10 years. I've been a photographer for about 20. I started out as a wedding and commercial photographer just out of college, and it taught me how to be present in the scene. And I enjoyed it, I enjoyed the more candid approach to photography, which piqued my interest in photojournalism.

So after a number of years of shooting or of covering weddings, I was approached to do a number of assignments for my local newspaper of the Fresno Bee. And I very, very quickly fell in love with the idea of documenting my community, making pictures of my home, of the fellow citizens here in Fresno and Fresno county, and then having that work be seen by the community. There was something really special about that sharing.

So as soon as I started taking a couple of assignments for the Fresno Bee, I pivoted pretty quickly said, this is what I want to do, this is how I see the rest-- this is how I see the next chapter of my career going. So I made a rather impulsive decision to end my wedding photography business, relocate to New York with no context or real experience and try to pursue photojournalism out there.

Moving out to New York give me the opportunity to view with a little bit of objectivity my space as a Mexican-American. I was able to focus on more nuanced lens on my hometown in the Central Valley. The Central Valley has a kind of a complex identity crisis. It's three hours from LA, it's three hours from San Francisco, it's often framed as not the place that you want to go to but it's a place that's close to other good things. And once I moved to New York, I was able to look at it yeah, with a little bit more nuance that really understood the ethos of the city, the ethos of the valley. It's the agricultural center of the United States.

And so I was able to, through journalism, I was able to look at the more political and social nuances of what it was like to come from an agricultural city and what that means for labor and migration, especially as being a descendant of a, my grandmother who moved from Mexico to work in the fields in the 1940s. So that ended up taking my work into a different direction, starting probably in around 2014, 2015, where I decided to look at Mexican-American communities throughout the United States.

Obviously, the pandemic turned us all into pandemic journalists, and we all had to figure out how to cover a pandemic when we weren't really primed for that. I've never done conflict photography, I've never done war photography. And so yeah, the last couple of years, it's been pretty complicated for the industry as we try to figure out what type of work that we focus on.

**CHRISTOPHER** So on that note, if you could tell us a little bit more and again as I said, I'll link these two pieces and I hope everyone takes the opportunity to read them. But sounds like something that's very dear to your heart because it's your hometown. But the piece in The Atlantic, could you talk a little bit more about that? It says that you had worked kind of documenting this family for many years, and what was the result of that work? What do you want readers of the piece and those who are viewing your photos in the piece to take away from it? Is there anything that you kind of learned throughout the years of documenting this family's progression? And what was that?

**RYAN** Yeah. So that story first came about through my curiosity in the burgeoning tech industry across the United States but specifically in the Central Valley. There are a number of companies that started popping up that it appeared that they were replacing the more industrial kind of middle class jobs that have been, they have been evaporating over the last 10 to 20 years in the United States.

**CHRISTOPHER**  
**JONES:**

So it was originally conceptualized as a story just to look at like, hey, can Fresno be the next Boston? And Fresno be the next Silicon Valley? And there are other, honestly been a lot of stories like that. And very quickly, I realized that that was kind of a boring reductive story. And I ended up meeting Vincent Fernandez, he was a man who started taking coding classes after he made the decision to better his life. He had come from intergenerational poverty. His family of five lived on about \$100 a month after they paid expenses, and so he was like, I can't do this anymore. I need to figure out a way to help my family, put my family in a better economic space.

So I spent some time with them back in 2016. And over the next, I had been photographing them for four five years. And so what originally started as a story about broadly the tech scene in Central California turned into a much, much more intimate story about what does American mobility look like? We always talk about the American dream, if you work hard you can get anything you want, but there are factors that are entirely out of control of the people who are trying to make their lives better.

And so there's always this really, really kind of murky tension. And then the push and the pull between where someone or where a family is economically versus where they want to be. In over five years, I could really see how the family struggled. They're in a much better place now than they are when I when I first met them in 2016. But mobility is not a light switch, it's not something that you just say oh, I choose to be rich now or I choose to not be poor now. it's a long complicated struggle where a lot of people don't get there.

I was able to build the trust of the Fernandez family who has let me be a part of their life for the last five years to document this. It's a really quiet story. Following a family's economic trajectory is not exactly a loud bombastic story. But so I had to rely on quieter moments where I was able to photograph and they bought their first, Vincent and Britney, the parents, they bought beds for their kids for the very first time because they shared beds up until five years ago.

And so being able to visualize that symbol of growth, of mobility, it's part of being a journalist. It's being in these spaces, learning how to witness and observe and then kind of just trusting your gut on whether or not it's going to be important to the narrative or not.

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**CHRISTOPHER DAVIS:** That makes a great segue into the other big piece which in contrast to this as you said it, kind of a quieter, kind of delve into one family's evolution over several years. I'm assuming the piece in the times in the summer of 2020 kind of came about quite suddenly and dramatically. I mean, how did that come about and what was it like working on that piece?

**RYAN CHRISTOPHER JONES:** Oh, man. That one still haunts me almost two years later. It was the very beginning of the pandemic. I first went up to Boston in April of 2020. As we know, that was within the first month of the real acute trauma of the pandemic hitting the United States. I had worked with the New York Times religion reporter, Elizabeth Dias. She's an absolutely incredible reporter and incredible writer, and she brings a really subtle but powerful type of prose to journalism and to reporting that I don't see all the time. So we developed a very early bond in the way that we approached our work.

And I've taken a stand about photographing vulnerable people with sensitivity and compassion. It's something that photojournalism has often struggled with. The lens in which photojournalists have looked at how people suffer has not really been kind to the people who suffer. There's a look at a lot of the work that was made in the '80s during the crack epidemic, during the AIDS epidemic. Yeah, it was not very kind.

And so I have been a-- and this has been one of my missions in journalism is to say, hey, we can document complex and difficult things, but we can do it with a new kind of sensitivity where we don't just frame these people in the single dimension of pain and suffering. So Elizabeth was going to, she wanted to look at, what does this look like? What does this 2000-year-old ritual look like in the middle of a modern pandemic?

And so once I got the assignment, I very quickly had to kind of move my home base for a month to Brookline, Massachusetts, which is where I was I was based for almost a month. And we ended up getting blanket authorization from the Catholic archdiocese of Boston saying yes, you can do the story but we can't give access to you in the hospitals or with the families. So I had access to the priests but at that point, that was kind of the easy part.

So we ended up connecting with the priests trying to make contacts with a number of Boston area hospitals. Most places said no, they wouldn't allow us. But St. Elizabeth's medical center said yes and then Newton Wellesley also said yes. And again, so that was the second layer of consent. And the last and the most delicate and the most complicated was with the families. They had to make the decision of OK, will we allow this photographer to take pictures even though I'm not allowed to be there?

And so I spoke with a number of the families after they gave permission. I talked with a couple of family members as I was going into these rooms. Ultimately, ended up getting access to I think six families over the course of three-plus weeks. And yeah, from a practical perspective, I was just in survival mode. I had a job to do, it was incredibly sensitive, and there was like an internal moral quandary where it's like, oh, my gosh, I have access, I have to photograph this with honor and respect because these families aren't able to be with our loved ones as they are in the hospitals dying of COVID.

And then as soon as I got back to New York, the George Floyd protest hit. So I kind of had to switch gears and start documenting the protests. And then after that, I had to very swiftly pivot to documenting the 2020 election. And so I was in New York and Houston and Los Angeles covering the election. And it didn't occur to me until the end of the year, I was actually giving a presentation in Arthur Clement's class called *Quest For Wisdom*, where in that class, I actually finally processed everything. And I was hit with a wall of grief of what 2020 actually looked like.

And so yeah, that year, that story is still kind of painful to look at and to think about. But it also comes with the huge responsibility that we have as journalists to be witnesses during times of trauma and despair.

**CHRISTOPHER** The year that you describe, that time period, has it altered how you approach photojournalism or what you're interested in or the kind of stories that you want to cover? Has it kind of moved the needle for you in any way?

**RYAN** It's a great question. I think it reinforced just how important our jobs are as journalists and as visual journalists, we're the ones-- you know, a lot of the reporting that was done in the early pandemic was done remotely but the photographers had to be there. We were the ones who had to be in the scene. And so there is a lot of I think secondary trauma that came from witnessing all that stuff.

So I don't think it changed my approach to anything, I think it reinforced kind of my mission of yes, we need to document hard things with compassion. And yeah, I mean, you know, awards are cool and whatever, but it's nice to know that the people who I'm photographing actually see the work as respectful and purposeful. And that's honestly the main goal for me.

**CHRISTOPHER** That reminds me actually that leads to follow up question. What was the response, if you would mind sharing,  
**DAVIS:** from the families of the folks that you had photographed during your time? I'm sure it was I don't know if you heard anything from them after the piece was published, but I'm curious if you did hear a response from them, what it was.

**RYAN** Yeah. I know that Elizabeth heard from a couple of people, and we've kept in touch with the priest as well. It's  
**CHRISTOPHER** funny, I actually got a call shortly after it published from one of the main priests who we covered. And they were  
**JONES:** apprehensive about having us come into their space. And you know, the Boston archdiocese has a pretty complicated political history in the last 20, 30 years. So they were apprehensive about letting the place like the New York Times come in, and they at some point felt that we were, they just maybe just assumed that we would mock the rituals.

I grew up Catholic, politics aside, this is an important time to document for history, why would we mock this? But I got a call from one of the priests and he said, "Hey, you did a really beautiful and tender job at this. I feel bad for second-guessing the whole process at first. You really did us right." And that feels good. That feels rewarding. And yeah, Elizabeth mentioned that she heard from a couple of the other people who are in this story whose families passed.

And I think that it was a hard thing for people to look at, to confront. In particular, two pictures, two or three pictures, they're a lot, they're pretty heavy. But I know that from what I heard that they were thankful that anyone could be present to be there, whether or not the patients were cognizant of my presence or not, there is there is something powerful about being there.

**CHRISTOPHER** I can imagine the complexity of the emotions that you felt, the priests who were there, the families of the  
**DAVIS:** patients. Yeah, I'm sure that's a minefield of all kinds of emotions. So what's next for you? I'm curious. So I think as I said, I hope I'm not speaking out of term, but I think you're going to move on to a PhD program. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

**RYAN** Well, I just applied to 11 going on 12 PhD programs in anthropology for programs all over the country. Yeah.  
**CHRISTOPHER** Harvard Extension changed my life and changed the trajectory of my life in a lot of ways. My work as a journalist  
**JONES:** puts me in places. My whole job is talking to people, my whole job is observing people, is noticing the relationships between people and other people and people and their environment.

And I always had these questions that were, they weren't quite the questions that journalism answers. And then in 2018, I took a class with Professor Carrasco of the Harvard Divinity School, it was on the cultural history of Mexico because I wanted some more context as I was doing reporting on the border, I was, been working on a long-term project about my own Mexican-American identity, I work in Mexico city relatively often. So I just wanted a broader kind of historical framework for the work that I was doing as a journalist.

I take his class and it completely blows my mind because it addressed the questions that I had in the back of my mind, the ones that I found that journalism doesn't quite answer, anthropology does. And so it very quickly turned into this passionate academic love affair with understanding anthropology as a field of study and as a place where I could do future research, where I can leverage the work that I've done as a journalist into a space that gives me more time to study that allows me to look at the social structure of all of these problems that I'm reporting on down in the field.

And so yeah, I had a couple really supportive professors who said, you know what? You actually may be pretty good at this. You know what it's like, ethnography, anthropological ethnography is very similar to what journalism does and a very broad sense of you observe people in places. That's journalism and that's also ethnography. And I've been doing it for 20 years. So once I got some really powerful support from some of Harvard's anthropologists, I felt confident that I should at least put my name into some of these programs.

And so my whole last year was me building up my academic tools so that I could approach these applications with as much strength as I possibly could, which includes the faculty program. I saw that Professor Lisa Gulesserian, she's in the near eastern languages and civilizations department, she's an Armenian teacher, she's an expo teacher, and she put out a call saying that she always wanted to do a media studies paper looking at the way that Western media reported on the 2020 war between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

I actually pitched a story that got denied, and there is a whole labyrinth of politics as to why I got denied. And so I felt like I had firsthand experience of what Western media was doing when it comes to approaching this conflict. And so for one whole year now, I may be working with Lisa for the third term, where we've been doing research, analyzing all the data of all of the work that's been published by Western media publications during a six week period. We're doing critical discourse analysis and asking, what is it that journalism got wrong? What did they do right? How could they have done a little bit better at the reporting? What's the language that they used? What does it mean to cite state sources versus sources that perhaps are a little bit more free?

And I feel like we are working with Dr. Gulesserian, we built a really productive rapport very quickly because she brought her extensive experience in Armenian studies to this place where I brought my extensive experience in journalism. And we're right now, we're writing the paper and we'll be submitting it hopefully for peer review at some point in the next six months. And that's an incredible like, that's an absolutely incredible program and experience to be a part of.

And I will have a co-authored paper with her because I took this thing and we were able to truly collaborate on something. And so I saw that as a way to prepare myself for PhD research. It's been just one of the more productive and delightful experiences of my whole schooling experiences is being able to work with her and actually build something built off of the data that we analyze.

**CHRISTOPHER DAVIS:** It's enormously gratifying to hear that as the person who manages that program, That's certainly my hope all the time, and I've certainly heard from students and alumni. Actually one of my early podcasts was with an ALB student who was just about to graduate, and he had worked as a faculty aide for several different instructors around the university and had just been accepted to a PhD program at Georgetown at the time. So I've certainly seen and heard examples of how it's led to that in the past.

And also just what you're describing sounds enormously interesting and very relevant. I mean, as a companion to what we were talking about, you had documented during 2020 the different crises, the different events, current events that were popping up all over the country. I think there's also been a very strong conversation on social media, not necessarily criticisms of the media but also just kind of talking about who's reporting the news, who is approving what is being reported and how it's framed, whether it's domestic issues, whether it's international reporting, reporting on different crises around the world. So it's definitely something that is very relevant and very much part of the conversation in many different ways.

Well, on that note Ryan, I will say thank you so much for sharing this with me and with all the people listening, students, instructors, other folks.

**RYAN** Of course. Thank you so much. I'm excited and anxious that with the next six to eight weeks of decision making  
**CHRISTOPHER** and rejections and offers look like. But either way, I'm excited for the future and have a lot to thank. A lot to be  
**JONES:** thankful for and I'm very fortunate for the extension school introducing me to these bigger ideas.

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**CHRISTOPHER** You have listened to *The Clark Podcast*. This is the podcast for the career and academic research center here at  
**DAVIS:** Harvard Extension School. And I hope you will join us again.

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